

“A Sound of Hammering”
by Dazai Osamu

Bryan P. Hoffman
Princeton High School
August 2005

Grade 10
English II

1. Context

Grade 10 Sophomore English II, Regular Placement (note, there is no tracking for this level, thus this is a class of mixed ability)

Class Size: 25

Number of Class Hours: 6 class periods x 44 min./period = 264 min.

2. Summary

“A Sound of Hammering” is a letter written by a former soldier after the Japanese surrender at the end of WWII. The letter is addressed to an unnamed author for whom the narrator has developed a fondness after reading several of his stories and novels. Throughout the letter it is apparent that the narrator is trying to find his place in society. This is clear from the very beginning when, upon returning home, he finds his father, older brother and his brother’s wife living in a “miserable shack on the site of the old house” (Osamu, 74). He decides “As badly off as I was, I could not bring myself to barge into this cramped home...” (Osamu, 74). The narrator literally no longer fits in the society of his family—his prewar life. Thus, it is clear his life path has been disrupted, which is so often the case for surviving soldiers. He then takes up a position at a “third-class post office in A-” (Osamu, 74).

He discovers a connection between himself and the author whom he admires. He points out that the two had gone to the same middle school, and, later, that the author too had been “burned out” (presumably referring to having had his home burned down by the war) (Osamu, 75). The narrator seems to be grasping at all he can in order to find some purpose and direction for his life. This thin connection between him and the author fills him with an intense joy evident through his statement “My heart nearly burst,” which he says after both aforementioned revelations (Osamu, 75). Such strong emotions can be attributed to his intense need to define himself. As though the author is an old friend who understands the narrator fully, the narrator asks for his advice on a problem he claims plagues not only him but others whom he says “...are tormented by a problem similar to mine...” (Osamu, 75). Here the narrator is probably referring to other soldiers who have returned home after the surrender only to discover they no longer fit in with the rest of society. For the remainder of the story the narrator fluctuates between feelings of optimistic ambition and the extreme opposite feeling that there is no point to anything. Each time he is about to pursue some interest that would ultimately reconnect him to Japanese society, he hears the sound of hammering and is instantly thrown back into complete despair over the pointlessness of everything. For example, after a time at the post office, he “...began to develop a pride in the life I was leading” (Osamu, 76). He works hard and “...wanted to do everything” (Osamu, 76). During this phase he experiences a high degree of pride in his work. When the work subsides a bit he “...recalled, with a feeling of tremendous pride and satisfaction, the motto ‘Labor is sacred’” (Osamu, 77). Yet, at that very moment he hears the distant sound of a hammer banging. Suddenly, “From that moment everything seemed ridiculous” (Osamu, 77).

The same happens when he falls in love with Tokita Hanae, a lovely woman who each week mysteriously deposits thousands of yen into an account at the post office. When an opportunity arises for the narrator to pursue his romantic interest, he hears the hammer and gives this up as well. Toward the end of the story he asks “Just exactly what is that sound?” (Osamu, 80). This

is a good question and he is quick to refute the notion that it is simply nihilism¹. The sound of hammering goes far deeper than this as it “...shatters even nihilism” (Osamu, 80). Thus, the sound is beyond even meaninglessness and conjures up the image of a supreme black void.

1 1. Total rejection of prevailing religious beliefs, moral principles, laws, etc., often from a sense of despair and the belief that life is devoid of meaning. Also more generally (merging with extended use of sense 3): negativity, destructiveness, hostility to accepted beliefs or established institutions.

2. a. *Philos.* The belief or theory that the world has no real existence; the rejection of all notions of reality (dictionary.com).

In the end, he admits to having heard the hammering while writing the letter and ultimately dismisses the letter, saying, “What I have written seems so stupid that I have a feeling that I have written you a pack of lies in desperation” (Osamu, 82). Perhaps most startling is the brief and shallow reply from the writer whom the narrator so adored and admired in which he dismisses the narrator as having “...a self-conscious despair...” (Osamu, 82). The writer admits “I am afraid I don’t have much sympathy for you” (Osamu, 82). He leaves the narrator with a quotation from Matthew 10:28, and a plea to accept the words of Jesus in order to find peace.

3. The Big Picture

“A Sound of Hammering” is a modern Japanese story that was published in 1947. It is partially an autobiographical story that seeks to examine postwar life for Japanese soldiers. After the Japanese accepted the Potsdam Declaration and surrendered in 1945, there was a tremendous push for everyone to move on and forget the war. This is quite a daunting task for soldiers returning home to broken homes and disconnected lives (Alvis). Thus, “...Hammering” uncovers the harsh reality of life for many soldiers. This is a universal experience that can be seen in many other cultures after war.

4. Discussion Questions and Answers

(1) Characterize the narrator.

The narrator is a young Japanese soldier who returns home after the Japanese surrender at the end of WWII. Because he is only twenty-six years old, and having spent a good portion of his brief adult life fighting in the war, the narrator is somewhat of a lost individual. Upon his return he discovers his “...home had been burned down...” and the remaining members of his family are living in a cramped, “...miserable shack...” (Osamu, 74). Thus, he literally does not immediately fit in his former society, because the shack is so small he must find lodging elsewhere. The narrator desperately seeks to define himself. He grasps hungrily at the thin connection he discovers between him and a writer whom he admires. His intense need to find similarities between himself and the writer indicate deep rooted feelings of disconnect from society. However, not only does he fail to reintegrate into Japanese society, but deep within himself he senses there is no meaning to anything. Each time he is about to define himself (in terms of beliefs, career, love, etc.) he hears a sound of hammering which seems to beat out whatever notions he has in his mind and leaves him feeling empty and desperate.

(2) What effect does the letter format have on us as readers?

By having the narrator address his concerns to an established writer through a letter gives one the feeling of having found an authentic letter from the post-WWII era. The letter is written in the style of a personal journal or diary, furthering the feeling of authenticity. This format enables the reader to trust the narrator and adds a realistic quality to the story. The narrator seems to be a soldier who actually lived in Japan just after the surrender, thus, his suffering is more believable and poignant. The reader has the feeling the narrator was not alone in his postwar feelings, but that there were indeed "...others who are tormented by a problem similar to mine" (Osamu, 75). In this way, the author has distanced himself from the text so as to avoid having the story seen solely as social commentary and more as a recounting of actual experience.

(3) Why is the narrator so excited by the small connections between him and the writer whom he admires?

The narrator is desperately seeking to define himself. Because he is only twenty-six years old it is reasonable to assume that he has experienced very little of "normal" adult life. Rather, he spent the years of his young adulthood as a soldier in war. Thus, he missed the period of life when most young adults begin to discover their place in society. Upon his return he feels like an outsider. Therefore, it is no surprise that he grasps at a potential identity through a connection between him and an admired writer. The intensity with which he seeks to define himself overrides the fact that the connections between him and the writer are small at best.

(4) "Just exactly what is that sound?" In your response, examine why the author uses the sound of hammering rather than some other sound (for instance, why not gun shots, exploding bombs, or screeching fighter planes?).

Hammering is a loud, thudding noise that has the ability of making one forget what one was thinking about. In this story, hammering is an appropriate sound because it conjures up an image of the narrator's grand thoughts being smashed away, as though they were fragile glass figurines—one moment they look like beautiful horses or people frolicking, and the next they are merely granules of quartz. Each time the narrator has a thought that is about to define him socially, politically, or emotionally the hammering is heard, pounding away at his lofty thoughts until they are dust.

(5) In the end, is the writer's reply to the narrator's letter satisfying? Does he answer the narrator's question?

The writer's response to the narrator of the story is ironic. He offers very little in the way of practical advice and, instead, entirely dismisses the narrator's "problem" by saying "Yours is a self-conscious despair.... I'm afraid I don't have much sympathy for you. You still seem to be avoiding owning up to a conduct which men would unanimously call shameful and which is obviously so to everyone; no explanations will suffice" (Osamu, 82). It is difficult to determine exactly what the writer means by shameful conduct, but perhaps he is referring to shameful acts committed in war that one must come to terms with upon reentering society, or he means that the narrator, in believing everything has lost its meaning, has essentially dismissed God. The latter

is the more satisfying answer and, when taken this way, the writer's brief response is seen as less dismissive and more like a slap as though he is saying "stop wallowing in darkness and renew your faith." In the end, what can the narrator expect from the writer? He presents a vague, esoteric problem that has no outward solution. Besides, if the narrator's main problem is that he no longer sees the purpose of anything, then would any proposed solution be satisfying?

(6) What is the significance of the quote from Matthew 10:28: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell"?

Perhaps the most startling revelation here is seeing the influence of the West on Japanese society. Because Christianity originated in the West (or, Middle East), by referencing it in this story, the author is using it as a symbol of the massive changes that occurred in Japan during this time period. Christianity had only been recently reintroduced in Japan in the 19th century and just prior to and during WWII the Shinto religion dominated Japan (wikipedia.org). At the very least, during the time of this story Japan itself was experiencing a massive reconstruction—both physically and socially/spiritually.

Essentially, the writer is indicating through this quotation that the narrator's real problem is a rejection of God, or Jesus. The narrator has rejected God through his suggestion that there is no meaning or purpose to anything (ambitions, love, career, life, etc.). Through a belief in the Christian God all things have a purpose, all things play a part in "God's plan"—at the very least, according to Christianity, all things were created by God, which endows them with meaning. Thus, in context the quotation is an apt one that is an attempt by the writer to encourage the narrator to put his faith in God, otherwise, he will be doomed to rot in hell. Through this quotation and the writer's comment to "accept these words of Jesus...then I assure you you will stop hearing things," one can clearly see that a lack of faith in God is the writer's final assessment of the narrator's dilemma (Osamu, 82). Yet, more than that, the narrator may also be struggling with assimilation to Western ways. Through rejecting Christianity, he seems to be, in a way, holding on to former Japanese society.

(7) What is the narrator's place in the world?

Because we do not have a response to the writer from the narrator, it is impossible to say whether or not the narrator has discovered his place in the world. If he followed the writer's advice then his place in the world can be defined through Christianity. In this scenario, he is one of God's children who must strive to be virtuous, avoid sin, and so forth. Also, he would be instantly connected to not only fellow Christians but all of humanity as the masses are all seen as brothers and sisters created by God. However, if he found the writer's advice to be dismissive and unhelpful, then his place in society is yet to be discovered. Sadly, he may feel he no longer has a place in society. This may be the case if we are to read the story as a partially autobiographical account of the author's life. Dazai Osamu ultimately committed suicide perhaps because he was part of an era of young men who experienced the harsh "...anguish and uncertainty of life in modern Japan" (Osamu, 82). In this way, the narrator has no place in society and it can be said that he died during the war. Literally WWII striped him of his identity, and figuratively killed him, leaving him to wander around Japan very much like a restless ghost.

5. Activities

I. (Day 1) Fact Finding Mission—WWII, specifically Japan’s surrender.

Objective: By the end of the lesson students will be able to demonstrate understanding of the significance of Japanese surrender at the end of WWII.

1. For homework, have students find information on the internet or in a library regarding the following topics. They should bring printouts and/or photocopies to class with them and write a brief paragraph for each topic.
 - Causes of WWII
 - Japanese involvement in WWII, including reasons for their involvement
 - Types of warfare Japanese used
 - Potsdam Declaration, and what it meant for the Japanese
 - Condition of Japanese economy/entire infrastructure after the surrender
 - Treatment of soldiers upon return from war after the surrender
2. **(15–25 min. Note: amount of time may vary depending upon student engagement)** In class have the students take turns sharing their information, encourage them to take notes while others are speaking.
3. **(5 min.)** Ask the students to state what they have learned about both WWII and the Japanese involvement in the war. The idea here is to encourage them to identify what they believe to be the most significant facts.
4. **(24 min.)** Distribute “A Sound of Hammering” and, in the time remaining, begin reading the story aloud. Ask the students to finish reading the story for homework. Also distribute a list of discussion questions to be answered as they read.

NOTE: Consider withholding the final section of the story in which the writer replies to the narrator. See “(Day 4) Giving Advice to the Main Character...” and Appendix B for details.

II. (Day 2) Character Web.

Objective: By the end of the lesson students will be able to demonstrate understanding of the main character's personality and motivation.

Materials needed: White paper; markers; crayons; tape; copies of "The Significance of Hammering."

1. **(2 min.)** Break the class into small groups—pairs or groups of three work best for this exercise. Give each pair/group a sheet of blank paper and a set of markers or crayons.
2. **(15 min.)** Instruct the students to:
 - a. In the middle of the paper draw a circle. Within that circle write "narrator."
 - b. Next, discuss with your partner(s) your impressions of the narrator. Think of adjectives that accurately describe him. Then write them in the space around the circle in the center of the page, drawing lines to connect each adjective to the word "narrator."
 - c. Next, look for quotations within the text that support each adjective. For example, if you believe the narrator is suspicious you may consider including a quotation from the scene in which he questions why Tokita Hanae deposits thousands of Yen each week.
 - d. Lastly, review your character web with your partner(s) and compose a 3–4 sentence conclusion in which you characterize the narrator based upon your chosen adjectives.
3.
 - a. Ask 3–4 partners/groups to present their character webs. Use these webs as a way of discussing the narrator.
 - b. Encourage other groups to share portions of their webs that differ from the 3–4 initial groups who share.
 - c. As each group shares, have one student record key attributes shared by the class on a larger character web on a large sheet of newsprint or pasteboard. Lastly, hang this large character web in a prominent place on the wall as a representation of your class' collective observations about the narrator. The idea here is to prepare students to examine the narrator's behaviors to eventually discover the symbolic meaning of the sound of hammering.
4. Distribute the handout "The Significance of Hammering" (Appendix A) and review the instructions for "Part A."

For homework: Complete "Part A" of the handout "The Significance of Hammering."

III. (Day 3) Discovering the Significance of the Hammering.

Objective: By the end of the lesson students will be able to demonstrate understanding of the symbolism of the sound of hammering.

1. Before class, number each instance of hammering on your copy of the short story (there are 6 main instances). In class, assign a different section to each group. Indicate to them that this is the scene they are to visually depict in “Part C.” When the class is finished there should be a visual depiction of each instance of hammering. Hang it on the wall in sequence; now the story has been turned into a graphic.
2. Divide the class into 6+ small groups.
3. **(5 min.)** Have the students begin by sharing responses to “Part A” (which was last night’s homework) then ask them to complete parts B and C.
4. Give the students a time limit for each section. For example: 5 minutes for sharing “Part A”; 15 minutes for “Part B”; 10 minutes for drawing conclusions; and 14 minutes for “Part C.”
5. **(10 min.)** Before students begin working on “Part C,” hold a class discussion in which the students draw conclusions about the sound of hammering. Ask, “What does the sound symbolize?” Once the class has demonstrated their understanding, allow them to work on “Part C.” If the students seem confused, continue the discussion as necessary and assign “Part C” for homework.

IV. (Day 4) Giving Advice to the Main Character: Creative Writing Exercise.

Objective: By the end of the lesson students will be able to demonstrate advanced understanding of the main character and will be able to identify the major theme of this story.

1. **(5 min.)** **Before beginning today's lesson, review the visuals the students created in yesterday's class (and finished for homework).

In order for today's lesson to be most effective, be sure that when you initially give the story to the students you omit the very last section which is the response from the writer to whom the narrator addresses his letter.

At this point in the unit the students should already have analyzed the letter using the preceding activities. As a final activity before finishing the story, have them write a response from the perspective of the writer whom the narrator addresses. Share responses in class, then read the writer's response aloud, compose a reaction journal, then share.

2. Copy and distribute the handout in Appendix B entitled "Dear Narrator."
3. **(5 min.)** Review the directions with the students.

For homework:

- A. Find accounts from modern U.S. soldiers who have experienced difficulties returning to society after a war or tour of duty.
- B. Choose one account and write a thoughtful journal in which you compare the U.S. soldier's experiences with either (or both) the narrator of "A Sound of Hammering" and/or Paul from *All Quiet....* Be prepared to share in class.

Due in two class periods from today (day 6). (See "Resources" section for helpful web sites.)

V. (Day 5) Conclusions.

Objective: By the end of the lesson students will be able to demonstrate understanding of the major theme(s) of the story.

1. Today, have the students share their creative writing exercises. These should be quite interesting and varied.
2. Next, ask them to share their responses to the actual letter from the writer.

Both of the above activities should produce a lively discussion that may turn into a debate. This is exactly what you're hoping for. Just be sure to keep the students focused on the story and its major theme(s).

3. Ask the students to have the discussion questions with answers on their desks. Use these questions to further stimulate class discussion. Consider emphasizing question # 6: What is the significance of the quote from Matthew 10:28: "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell"?
4. Have the students list the major theme(s) on the chalkboard. Be sure they are able to provide textual evidence to support their assertions.

The students should be able to recognize the following themes in this story:

Man vs. himself—the struggle to redefine oneself and come to terms with a changing world; specifically, the struggles a soldier encounters upon returning home from war.

Man vs. the universe—asking the ultimate question "what is the point of it all?" or "what is the meaning of life?"

VI. (Day 6) Extensions and Modern-Day Connections.

Objective: By the end of the lesson students will be able to demonstrate comprehension of how the themes and issues present in “A Sound of Hammering” also exist in our modern world.

1. Have students share the articles they found as part of their homework assignment. Also have them share their journal reflections. Depending on how much time you have, you may or may not be able to allow all students to share both their articles and journal entries. If you are pressed for time, students can offer summaries of the articles and share most of their personal reflections.
2. Ask the students the following questions:
 - a. What similarities exist among the stories we’ve heard today?
 - b. What links do we see between these articles and “A Sound of Hammering”?
 - c. Did the articles in any way change your perception of the events of the story “A Sound of Hammering”? Explain.
 - e. What conclusions can we make regarding soldiers’ experiences of war? Be detailed.
3. Have a class note-taker record the students’ responses to these questions. Place these responses on the wall to show the enduring lessons the students have learned.

**If you use this as a companion piece with *All Quiet...*, consider having the students compose a final, formal 5-paragraph essay in which they compare/contrast Paul Baumer’s experiences upon returning home from the war with those of the narrator of “A Sound of Hammering.”

6. Connections to Other Literary Works

This story connects very well with the novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque. Paul Baumer, a German soldier fighting in WWI, and the narrator of *All Quiet...*, thinks far too much for his own good. As a soldier he has been taught to fight simply for the honor of the country. Yet as Paul sees the violent, horrific deaths of close comrades and faceless enemies, he begins to question the purpose of the war. Having been ripped from his life when he was just about to graduate from school at age 18, this story is about a man's quest for identity amid the chaos of war brought on by national pride. When Paul returns home in chapter 7 he experiences a similar social disconnect as the narrator of "...Hammering." Paul can no longer relate to his family or the men of the older generation whom he believes betrayed him and his fellow comrades by encouraging them to become soldiers. While the older generation and the leaders view the war from a relatively safe distance, they are able to criticize the soldiers as though the soldiers were simply playing a competitive sport. Paul, however, knows the truth of the horrors of war. Ironically, he only feels at home on the front lines with his comrades. He is truly part of a lost generation and had he survived the war, his fate would have been similar to the narrator of "...Hammering"—unable to reconnect with a shattered past, unable to begin a new life, ultimately destroyed by the war.

See also "Harrison Bergeron" by Kurt Vonnegut.. This is a futuristic tale in which Vonnegut criticizes communism. In the story, one of the many limitations placed on people is a loud noise that blares every few minutes. Each time the noise blares, the characters' thoughts evaporate. This is a means of government control of the people. The blaring noise is a bit different from the sound of hammering; while the blaring noise in "Harrison Bergeron" annihilates all thoughts, the sound of hammering merely makes the narrator feel as though all things are without meaning.

7. Resources

Osamu, Dazai. "A Sound of Hammering." In *Japan Quarterly*. V.16, n.2, 1969.

Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front*. trans. A.W. Ween. New York: Ballantine Books, 1987.

Alvis, Andra. *Lecture Notes: "Psychological 'Realism' in Modern Japanese Literature."* Bloomington: Indiana University, 2005.

OED. September, 2003. Accessed August 17, 2005.

<[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00324776?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=nihilism&first=1&max_to_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00324776?single=1&query_type=word&queryword= nihilism&first=1&max_to_show=10)>

Wikipedia.org. August 16, 2005. Accessed August 17, 2005.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religions_of_Japan#Christianity>

Additional Resources

Vonnegut, Kurt. "Harrison Bergeron." August 24, 2005. Accessed August 24, 2005.

<<http://instruct.westvalley.edu/lafave/hb.html>>

Kipling, Leslie. "Fighting Combat Stress." *Military.com*. February 7, 2005. Accessed August 24, 2005.

<http://www.military.com/NewContent/0,13190,Defensewatch_020705_Kipling,00.html>

Cramer, Maria and Jadhav, Adam. "Screening is urged on return from Iraq." *The Boston Globe*. August 16, 2005. Accessed August 24, 2005.

<http://www.boston.com/yourlife/health/mental/articles/2005/08/16/screening_is_urgued_on_return_from_iraq/>

The Significance of Hammering

Directions: The purpose of this activity is to discover the significance of the sound of hammering. Without understanding this, the story is simply an odd postwar tale. However, authors often convey a broader message that helps us better understand a particular event or social condition. To help you understand the author’s intentions, complete the following chart in “Part A,” make thoughtful conclusions in “Part B” then begin working on your visual for “Part C.”

Part A:

What is the narrator doing just prior to hearing the sound of hammering? What is he thinking and feeling?	When does he begin to hear the sound of hammering?	Once he hears the sound, what is the result?

“Dear Narrator”

Directions:

Part A: Imagine that you are the writer to whom the narrator has addressed his letter. Recall that the narrator hopes the writer will be able to help him with this debilitating experience of hearing a sound of hammering. Review the letter from the narrator and compose a thoughtful reply in which you offer the narrator advice on the source of the hammering, its significance, and a possible remedy for the narrator to help him escape this cycle of suffering. Be sure to maintain a serious tone throughout. Your letter needs to be 1 page in length—use a separate sheet of paper and attach it to this one.

Part B: Now ask your teacher for a copy of the actual letter the writer sent to the narrator (this is the final section of the story which you have not yet read). Answer the following questions:

- a. Did you expect this type of response from the writer? Explain.

- b. How does your response differ from the writer’s? Compare?
